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ABSTRACT

Department chairs occupy what is arguably one of the most important administrative spots in a higher education institution. As a group, they set the academic tone of the institution and greatly facilitate or hinder the accomplishment of its mission. The various types of department chairs are described: hopeful, survivors, transient, and adversarial. The hopeful ones are eager to learn and share, recognizing they can make a difference. They are less embarrassed about having been selected chair and do not seem to need to participate in the circumlocutions of the reigning mythology regarding academic leadership. The survivors are more likely to have been selected by administrators and to belong to large, stable departments. They can provide organizational continuity and perspective, though some need to be replaced because they have become simple caretakers. The transient chairs seem most prevalent in institutions or departments where by tradition the position rotates and elections are friendly and uncontested. These positions invite quick turnover and provide little nourishment for either chair or department. The adversarial chairs are a steady and consistent element of negativity, often emerging from an unhappy and contentious faculty. They are angry and explosive individuals who view policy changes or resource limitations as unreasonable decisions aimed directly at them. There do not seem to be many truly adversarial chairs. All institutions need to pay attention to the circumstances and needs of their chairs since the position of chair is where things get done. (SM)

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Department Chairs

There are the "hopefuls," the "survivors," the "transients"...

by John B. Bennett

Department chairs occupy what is arguably one of the most important administrative spots in a higher education institution. As a group, department chairs set the academic tone of the institution and greatly facilitate or hinder the accomplishment of its mission.

How do department chairs feel these days? Taking my readings from the many workshops for them I have attended in recent years—both large, national events serving many institutions, and local campus events for one institution or a consortium—I'd say that their mood and humor vary considerably.

At one end of the spectrum are the hopeful chairs, addressing the challenges of their position with seriousness of purpose and expectations of decent success. At the other end are those chairs, perhaps burdened with past failures, who have given in to cynicism, inaction, or anger.

The Hopeful Ones

Department chairs who choose to attend national workshops are usually quite positive about their position. Eager to learn and to share experiences, they have come on their own initiative—a few even have paid at least some of their own way. Some will be brand new, and others may be several years into the job.

The hopeful chairs recognize that they can make a difference. They are rarely people grasping for additional power or authority, much less for higher status. Rather, they are interested in putting to full advantage the powers they sense they already have.

Composites Peter and Ellen are too such hopefuls. Peter has been chairperson of history for just over a year. He is determined to institute some changes, particularly to get the faculty more engaged in department activities and revitalized about teaching. His fifteen faculty are all tenured, have been at the institution for a long time, and are quite comfortable with their lot.

A number of matters need attention. The requirements for the major have not been reviewed in a decade, the department's institutional profile has sunk rather low, and two of the faculty have become the objects fairly consistently of complaints from students.

Among the suggestions Peter has garnered at the workshop are ideas about using individual faculty evaluation and development activities and events to promote and advance collective goals, applying motivational techniques, and dealing with conflict.

Ellen is new to her position as chairperson of a recently formed allied health unit. Her school's administration has just been reorganized, and the department now contains faculty from two previously separate units. Her question is how to transcend the old customs and patterns of interaction. A particularly important issue for her is how to deal with the two former chairs in her unit, both unliberated men clearly bitter at having lost their positions.

Ellen is confident about her own academic abilities and credentials. She needs to hear about successful strategies for creating a new departmental culture and for diverting and then co-opting hostility.

Both Peter and Ellen seem aware of the role ambiguity that is traditionally attached to the

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position of chairperson. Like chairs elsewhere, they know that both department faculty and upper-level administrators can have expectations of the chair that are completely unrealistic and perhaps even in conflict. Nevertheless, they do not seem burdened by these prospects. Most hopeful chairs can see the tensions of role ambiguity as a positive thing, masking or even creating opportunities.

When pressed about the source of their optimism, such chairs are likely to cite support by the dean and by department colleagues. They speak of small gains as the key to big change, and they are keenly interested in identifying ways to empower individual faculty.

Candid in their hopefulness, hopeful chairs are less embarrassed about having been selected chair, and they don't seem to need to participate in the circumlocutions of the reigning mythology regarding academic leadership. The mythology is illustrated by the reactions of colleagues upon one's selection as chair: condolences are offered, expressions of ambivalence are expected, and nervous laughter abounds. New chairs who honestly acknowledge the importance of academic administration are viewed with suspicion, and openly expressing a desire to serve is often a sure path to rejection.

Though not yet a celebration of the leadership role, the hopeful chair's straightforward statements are a move toward it, and away from the apologetic, defensive rhetoric all too prevalent in academe.

I see the hopeful chairs at campus workshops as well, of course, but they are not so evident, for any of several reasons. One may be a natural reluctance to appear too eager before one's colleagues, thereby violating the prevailing mythology. Sometimes, too, participants see such a campus workshop as more the idea of the provost than theirs; there, the provost's zeal to assist has backfired, and chairs resent the help they did not request. Nurturing and empowering chairs can be a lengthy process, and academic officers may need to go slowly.

The Survivors

Hopeful chairs are unlikely to have been chairs for long. As with mushroom hunters, there seem to be old chairs and bold chairs but few old, bold chairs. The survivors—those with more than ten years of service as chair—are more likely to have been selected by administrators (and to carry the title "head," which traditionally denotes a political appointment) and to belong to large, stable departments.

Joe is a composite survivor. Joe has been head of a large biology department for twelve years. His agenda now is mostly maintenance of earlier actions and accomplishments. Issues have been settled, a routine is in place, and expectations are familiar and comfortable. In the last couple of years, Joe has felt some internal conflict over his situation. Twelve years is a long time to be responsible for things, and his scholarship and reading have suffered. Also, he is afraid he may have run out of new ideas.

On the other hand, his sense of personal identity is now associated with being chair. Joe enjoys knowing the provost and chancellor on a first-name basis and being privy to the internal workings of the institution. He suspects he would miss the small perks and sense of budget control he has come to appreciate. Further, he is uncertain how easily he would get up to speed in his fast-moving field and find a research project, were he to return full-time to the faculty.

Some survivors are invaluable to the institution. They provide organizational continuity and perspective; they have figured out how to enable others; and they possess staying power and stamina. Losing them creates a void, and their successor may well be inferior. But stamina is unevenly distributed; other survivors need to be replaced. They have become simple caretakers, and their capacity to enable others has dwindled.

Perhaps their leadership style and management gifts were appropriate to earlier departmental needs, but things have changed and they haven't. Such survivors suggest the value of periodically reviewing chairs to facilitate feedback from colleagues and the administration.

Ranged over against the survivors are those who assume the role of chair not only reluctantly but apparently with an eye toward leaving it behind as soon as possible. If the survivors risk overstaying their terms, then the transients are understaying theirs. "I'm simply serving my time" sums up much of their attitude.

The Transients

Transient chairs seem most prevalent in institutions or departments where by tradition the position rotates and elections are friendly and uncontested. "All the heads swiveled in my direction," Mary, a composite transient, recalled of her election day in such a department. "I had avoided the job as long as I could and now it was my turn in the barrel."

With little tradition of offering intrinsic satisfactions or other rewards to chairpersons, these departments and institutions virtually ask for uninspired leaders. The path of least resistance beckons attractively; the situation usually calls for preserving stasis and

easy congeniality. Unhelped to recognize leadership opportunities in the position, chairs like Mary and other faculty members at these places will resist becoming and remaining the chairperson. Like fast food establishments paying minimum wage, these positions invite quick turnover and provide little nourishment—for either chair or department.

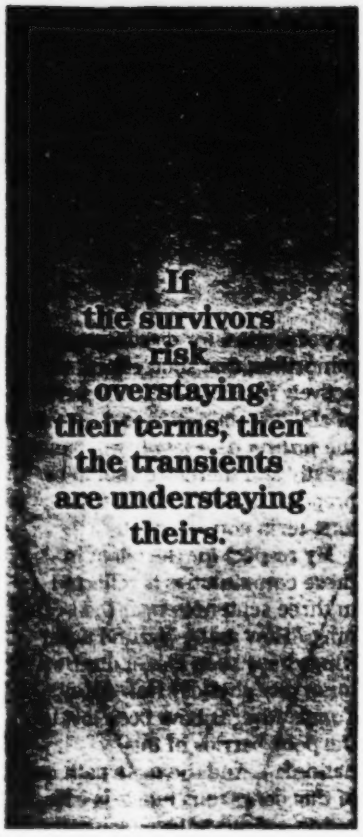
Redefining the job and renegotiating the selection process are probably the best ways to address the problem of the transient chair. Attending to chalk supplies, finding the janitor, scheduling teaching assistants, or facilitating travel reimbursements is not the stuff of leadership. The institution has an obvious interest in securing and supporting able chairpersons, and it should communicate that to the faculty.

The Adversarial Ones

One other type of chair merits brief comment. Most of us have at one time or another declaimed, "The problem is the *!@!!#%!*! administration!" After all, few organizations escape the occasional adversarial scrapes. But the adversarial chairs are a steadier and more consistent element of negativity. They often emerge from an unhappy and contentious faculty. These are not people who from time to time perceive the academic dean or others as thwarting the aspirations of the department. Rather, these are the angry, perhaps even explosive, individuals who view policy changes or resource limitations as unreasonable decisions aimed directly at them.

Occasionally the enemy is another faction within the department—colleagues who want a curriculum with more theory and less applied emphasis or vice versa, those who support or oppose the Marxist or deconstructionist critique, and so on. But usually, such a chair perceives the adversary to be outside the department.

Fortunately, there do not seem to be very many truly adversarial chairs. They rarely attend public workshops, but they are seen at some campus events, where they tend to recast the issues posed by the hopeful chairs into somber and irreconcilable terms. The adversarial and the hopeful chairs are almost complete opposites.



Our composite adversarial chair, Harry, usually views departmental problems as externally created—others are withholding funds or denying promotions because they don't value the discipline, are punishing the department for its earlier courageous statement on academic freedom, or are in some other way being duplicitous.

By contrast, the hopeful chair knows that the big picture is rarely so tidy or the department's enemies so well organized. Even though some problems may be externally caused, the solutions are almost always internal.

How best to address the problem of the adversarial chair is a judgment call. Once alerted by a concerned faculty, the dean may choose to talk sympathetically and candidly with the chair, or may judge that approach a waste of time. In any case, for the dean to set limits and to identify unacceptable behaviors seems to be in order.

Interestingly, collective bargaining generally is unrelated to a chair's attitude—except for community college chairs in unionized institutions, particularly in the Northeast. There, the union contract is often so detailed that chairs are left with little on which to exercise judgment or discretion. Elsewhere, be they in the bargaining unit or out of it, chairs at unionized institutions face the parallel challenges of identifying the right faculty for the right projects and cultivating their enthusiasm and promoting their vitality—the same challenges before chairs in institutions without collective bargaining.

More Alike Than Different

I have sketched some characteristics of only a few types of department chairs, based on those I've met at workshops. But too often chairs of all types labor in isolation. Insulated from one another, even on the same campus, they face many of the same problems without realizing that they can be resources to one another. The challenges before them are many and the rules for success are few.

All institutions need to pay deliberate attention to the circumstances and needs of their chairs. The position of chair is so important because it is there that things get done—where the educational mission is actually delivered. It is chairs who advance affirmative action; initiate departmental curriculum review; and attend to the scholarship, teaching, and service of an aging faculty. The success of the institution rests heavily upon how successfully the chairs facilitate and monitor change with an eye to the needs of the institution as a whole.

The seriousness with which the hopeful chairs take their role is promising. Faculty and administrators alike need to consider ways of promoting more of the hopeful. Hopeful chairs are not necessarily heroic individuals (the academy doesn't need them), but they blend common sense, seriousness of purpose, and a readiness to challenge vested interests and factionalism. Without abandoning collegiality or academic integrity, hopeful chairs are transcending the historic devaluation of administration that has served us so poorly. We need more of them. ■